DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 481 CS 212 930

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TITLE Between Schools: Inter-Classroom Collaboration.
PUB DATE 19 Apr 91
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference on Computers and English (4th, Old Westbury, NY, April 19, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; *Computer Networks; *Electronic Mail; Higher Education; Peer Evaluation; *Writing Evaluation; Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction; Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS Incarnate Word College TX; Saint Marys University of San Antonio TX; Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

Computer technology such as telecommunications software and electronic mail allowed students in advanced writing courses at Incarnate Word College and St. Mary's University in Texas to exchange comments about their papers. The intention of the writing teachers was to emphasize the role that invention and planning play in writing, to highlight the social aspect of writing, and to make collaboration more meaningful. Students read three books, wrote four formal papers, and kept a journal. Existing computer technology on the two campuses, while not ideal, proved manageable. Towards the end of the course, students not only reported feeling more comfortable with computers, but attending more to style so that readers could understand their work. They also said that they were rewriting more, and were feeling more comfortable and fluent as writers. One commonly reported problem, however, was that although the students quickly learned how to send each other messages, the comments were often pedestrian. It is possible that the students were paying more attention to the technology than to the substance, that they missed the non-verbal and verbal signals exchanged in usual class conferences, and that reading from the computer screen tended to emphasize spelling errors rather than organization, use of evidence, and creativity. Ideas for future classes included BITNET and INTERNET connections with students hundreds of miles away or in other countries, as well as collaborations between high school and college students. (PRA)

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Between Schools: Inter-Classroom Collaboration

by Susan Hall, Incarnate Word College

Palmer Hall, St. Mary's University

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Between Schools: Inter-Classroom Collaboration

by Susan Hall, Incarnate Word College

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In our paper today, we'd like to describe how widely available computer technology allowed students in advanced writing classes to communicate with their peers across town. Telecommunications software and electronic mail allowed students to expand their opportunities to exchange comments about their papers. Aside from describing the course itself, we'd like to make three major points. First, the use of the computer to foster communication between students helped further our goals for this writing course. That is, we want to talk about technology used to pursue humanistic ends. Second, this kind of cooperation between classes can be achieved in many kinds of courses and on campuses with relatively modest computer resources. Third, we feel we learned quite a bit from our initial experience and would like to share the things we intend to do differently next semester when we teach this course again.

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SYLLABUS:

In writing the syllabus for our advanced composition course, we chose the theme of change in American society, placing special emphasis on the careers chosen by individual students. Our

intention as writing teachers was two-fold. First, we wanted to emphasize the role that invention and planning play in writing. We hoped that providing a relatively rich mix of readings and discussions of different aspects of the same subject might help students see more potential within writing topics. Second, we wanted to emphasize the social aspect of writing and still leaving room for individual interests, we hoped to make collaboration more meaningful.

We selected three books as readings: Richard Louv's America II, an examination of the economic and social shifts since the 1960s -- shifts some analysts refer to as the move to the Sunbelt.

Larry McMurtry's The Last Picture Show, a novelistic meditation upon the death of a small town of almost mythic dimensions.

John McPhee's Heirs of General Practice, a book length essay on the family practice movement in American medicine and its attempt to recapture lost human values without abandoning technological advances.

We also included a fourth text -- Joseph Williams' Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace -- as a resource on revising prose.

We attempted to use writing assignments as well as thematically related readings to provide a framework for the course. We assigned four major papers:

1. In the first, students were asked to browse a major journal in their field, sampling articles from the present as well as from 10 and 20 years ago. The resulting paper was to be a

discussion of at least one way in which their profession has changed during that period.

2. The second paper asked students to examine in detail an ethical dilemma they might face in their careers and discuss how they would resolve it.

3. The third paper, based on an interview with an individual professionally active in the student's field, returned students to the issue of change, but from a more personal perspective than the first paper.

4. The last, and longest, essay was a futures paper. Drawing on what they had learned about their profession's past, students discussed one of the ways their professions will have changed by the year 2000.

In addition to these four formal papers, students kept a journal in which they summarized and commented upon the articles they were reading in preparation for their four essays.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE TECHNOLOGY

We were able to do what we planned to do with the course using existing technology on the two campuses. At St. Mary's University, we have an aging DEC VAX11/780 computer that is equipped with VAX e-mail and that is accessible from our labs in the campus library. Because the staff of the Computer Center is really very much service-oriented and is almost messianic in getting the academic wing of the University to make more creative use of computing

facilities, there was no problem in obtaining sufficient storage space for a class of this type for this first semester and for subsequent semesters.

Incarnate Word College is located about ten miles from St. Mary's University , is a somewhat smaller school, and is less computerized than is St. Mary's. But the college does have a very nice PC lab for student use. It is networked using NOVELL Netware 286, but with only two PCs having modems. This caused problems during the semester as assignments came due and there was a resulting move by students towards these two PCs. Aside from messaging between the students, we were forced to have the students turn in their actual assignments on disk to us and then we would use our own office PCs to upload the work to the VAX's directory. In commenting on other students' work, the IWC students would use the two modem-equipped PCs in the lab, use PCs from home or offices where they worked, or use a friend's PC. They were also invited to use terminals in the VAX terminal lab in the library at St. Mary's. None of this was ideal, but it did work. I suspect that one problem with teachers not being willing to approach a computer-assisted (not computer-moderated, class is the feeling that conditions have to be ideal for the class to work.

We made a BIG mistake with this first semester's work pattern by assigning just one VAX account for the entire class. The reason we did this is that we had worked under the assumption that more

students would take advantage of the possibility for throwing questions out to the entire group for assistance. Few students actually took advantage of the opportunity. Next semester, as we improve the class, we will build a sufficient number of VAX accounts to enable each workshop group to have its own group account and retain one big account for posting assignments and asking questions of the entire group. That should facilitate individual group interchange, since the directories will be smaller and more accessible. On the current one big account, there are frequently more than 100 individual messages and students have to scroll through the directory to find comments relevant to their own groups.

We could have made the big group work more easily by building sub-directories on the one VAX account, but the purpose of the class is to assist students in improving their writing abilities, not to teach them all they might ever need to know about VAX account structures.

We dedicated one class day to training students in how to use the VAX account. That was sufficient for St. Mary's students -- they could go to the lab, sit down turn on the terminal, type in the account number and password, type MAIL and then begin reading and sending messages. Since the IWC students had to learn an additional step in the process -- using PROCOMM to dial out from campus prior to logging on to the VAX, they should have had a

little more time. With the restriction of only two modemized PCs in the lab, they did not have enough "hands-on" experience with the system. Susan wound up having to do much more after-class teaching than did I. Each of my students could sit at his or her own terminal and work through the lesson as I talked to them. Susan's students saw it all happening, live, on a PC projection system, but then had to practice on their own.

After the training session, students had to log on, then retrieve and print two files before they could continue with the class. The first file, they read on-line -- how to print from VAX mail or How to capture files on PROcomm, load them into your wordprocessor file and print them. The second file was crucial: the syllabus for the course.

STUDENT REACTION TO THE ELECTRONIC SYSTEM

Initial reaction about the role computers would play in the course spanned the spectrum of popular opinion about technology. A few students were sure that our requirement that they use the computer in this writing course signaled the last gasp of civilization. Others were thrilled, hoped that earning about computers would be substituted for reading and writing. Most students were in the middle -- quietly interested, convinced that computers were in some amorphous way a "good thing," and open to the possibility that they could help them develop as writers.

When we surveyed students toward the end of the semester, we found that their actual reactions to the course were considerably less diverse than their earlier expectations. In general, students had similar experiences. Using the technology was initially somewhat difficult, but they got comfortable after the first paper or two. Initially, students had difficulty finding the time to send responses to other writers but soon managed to work the assignment into their schedules. Not surprisingly, most students also reported receiving few comments on their initial paper but more comments as the semester progressed. All in all, students typically reported that after an initial learning period they were able to make the computer function for them.

Our survey also suggested that we were pretty successful with the non-technical aspects of the course as well. Overwhelming numbers of students reported that they found the course theme and readings interesting, that writing about related topics was beneficial to them, that the writing assignments built upon each other, and that they began to see connections between apparently dissimilar texts.

The problem area in the course was the human interface with the computers. In general students learned relatively quickly to use the computer to send each other messages; unfortunately, they sent each other pretty pedestrian messages. Here's what one typical student remarked: "I enjoyed this class and was excited about getting strangers' input about my papers. But I was frustrated by the lack of depth, analysis and truly helpful

comments that were given." While 16% of our students reported that they got good comments, ones that were long enough and specific enough to be useful, the rest of the students reported receiving comments that were too vague or too complimentary to be useful.

We were, at first, puzzled by this finding. After all, students on both of our campuses were experienced at critiquing each other's papers orally and had practiced some procedure peer evaluation in at least one other writing class. However, there seem to be several explanations for the poor comments students sent.

1. The initial presence of new technology in a course focuses attention there; we were not vigilant enough to prevent students from paying too much attention to the mechanics of making comments on each other's papers rather than paying attention to the substance.

2. From previous courses, students were used to listening to others' papers and then giving verbal feedback. In that setting, students help each other extend their comments through the various verbal and non-verbal signals they exchange. These were absent in the kind of a-synchronous conferencing we used in this class, so students had to prompt themselves to expand upon their initial comment. To become really skillful, writers often have to depend upon their own internalized version of what a reader would expect. Nor coincidentally, the classes' best writers were typically the best responders.

3. Although we had given them instruction on how to do so,

few students were capturing documents so they could make hard copies. Reading a text as it passes by on the screen seems likely to focus attention on the occasional misspelled word rather than on global issues such as organization, use of evidence, creativity and the like.

In addition to asking them about their experience with the course, our survey asked students if the course had changed their attitudes toward writing and toward computers. About 3/4 of the students said yes to both questions. When discussing the computer, many noted their increased comfort in using it, their greater inclination to try other new software, their appreciation of it as a tool for teachers, and in a few cases simply the fun of it. When discussing how their attitudes toward writing had changed, many students cited changes quite in line with our goals for the course. The most common responses referred to attending more to style so a reader could understand their work, to rewriting more, and to feeling more comfortable and fluent as writers.

OTHER APPLICATIONS

Susan and I developed a rather simple computer-assisted writing group system to work with our advanced composition classes. It did require some technological knowledge for two major reasons: 1) Susan's college has a PC Lab manger but she had few knowledgeable student assistants to help with the full-time person is off.

2) The lack of a sufficient number of PCs with modems made it

difficult for IWC students to find available computer time. Our computer center staff at St. Mary's manages VAX-Mail, so we didn't have to do too much work in setting up accounts. This would be true of virtually any computer-assisted class at St. Mary's connecting with any other college or university in the United States or elsewhere.

This summer, for example, I'll be teaching a graduate-level creative writing class at St. Mary's, a friend I met through BITnet is teaching a similar class at Texas Tech -- 500 miles away. Our students will be making use of the BITnet connection to share their poems and short stories and receive comments on them. For the first time, for many of them, they'll have a readership that goes beyond family and friends to total strangers living hundreds of miles away. We have a Spanish teacher at St. Mary's who is currently investigating student to student contact with the Instituto Technologico in Monterrey, Mexico, to discuss a network link between Spanish students at St. Mary's and English students in Monterrey. What he hopes will be a fast-paced pen pal system that will help all the students master the new languages they are studying.

There is no reason that similar classes cannot be set up between political science students during election years to consider such raging topics as mud-slinging in political elections -- think of the Ann Richards election in Texas and the Jesse Helms election in North Carolina, for example. Students could probably learn a lot from each other.

The basic conclusion about the possibilities of the technology involved in BITnet and InterNET availability is that they are almost limitless. The technology is there, now, at most colleges and universities. It could be there for many high schools with close ties to specific universities, ties that would enable their students to make use of the networks.

Even without a big computer like the VAX, it is possible for schools to move in the direction of computer-assisted classes without an inordinate expenditure of funds. Many schools have already set up PC, Macintosh and, even Apple // based bulletin board and messaging systems. The basic technology requires a PC with a hard disk, a database program, a telecommunications program like PROcomm or CrossTalk, a modem and a telephone line. With these things existing at two schools and a reasonable knowledgeable computer technician to set up the system, a school can get started rather quickly, probably for less than $4,000 at each school. The problem is that with most PC technology, only one student would be able to dial in and use the system at a time. That's not too different, though, than the situation at Susan's institution.

On Susan's campus, they are discussing an adaptation of the advanced composition project to link the college and a cooperating high school. Rather than BITnet or Internet, they will use PCs, modem and a bulletin board, similar to the system described earlier. The college course is a sophomore survey enrolling students from all majors, but with an additional one-hour seminar attached to it devoted to education majors. The high school course

would likely be at the sophomore or junior level since seniors already have another cooperative arrangement with the college. The current plan does not involve the high degree of coordination throughout the semester. Rather, the two classes would agree to read three or four common texts at specified points in the semester. The high school students would post papers with their reactions to a text, scene or character. The college students would respond to the papers of several high schoolers.

Such an exchange would provide several benefits:

1. The high school students are provided with an additional audience to write for, someone without all the authority of their teachers, but also with a bit more literary sophistication than their peers.

2. The college students, all intending careers in teaching, get some practice in helpful ways to respond to student essays. In addition, they get a realistic look at the kinds of work younger students do; this in itself will be part of the material for discussion in the seminar.

3. The high school and the college teacher have a shared project. This kind of collaboration seems more likely to foster mutual appreciation and understanding than abstract discussions of articulation.

So that's it. The course seems to have worked well for us this semester, but not as well as we think it can. We'll be sharpening it up for next fall semester to try to make sure

students benefit even more from the various comments send by their peers at the cooperating college. Thank you for your time and kindness.